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Relationships Between Authority, Family, and  
Gender in His Dark Materials and Paradise Lost

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Graduation with Distinction Project

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**“Every Atom of Me and Every Atom of You”: Relationships Between  
Authority, Family, and Gender in *His Dark Materials* and *Paradise Lost***

The story of the Fall of humankind in Judeo-Christian mythology has long been a subject of reinterpretation in popular culture—images of Adam, Eve, and the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden have appeared in films, novels, and even children’s cartoons. The most well-known of these interpretations would undoubtedly be John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, dubbed by one critic as “the most canonical of high-culture texts” (Shohet 60). On its own, the late-seventeenth-century epic poem has spawned numerous retellings and re-imaginings since its initial publication, but certainly the most interesting and academically engaging of these subsequent texts is Philip Pullman’s high fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials*.

Since publication of the first installment, *The Golden Compass*, in 1995, the series has garnered critical attention and prompted public controversy for its subject matter, poignantly encapsulated in Pullman’s own words: “My books are about killing God” (Watkins 21). Written as a high-fantasy re-imagining of *Paradise Lost*, Pullman’s novels follow 12-year-olds

Lyra Belacqua and Will Parry, two lost young people unwittingly pulled into a theological and political conflict dating back millennia. In Lyra's world—for there are many in Pullman's universe, borrowing from Milton's own theories on the possibilities of other worlds (3.566-67)—witches and magic abound, and the tribal witch clans prophesize that Lyra is "the one who came before" (Pullman, *The Subtle Knife* 39).<sup>1</sup> According to the witches, she is a reincarnation of Eve from the Garden of Eden, and the prophecy foretells that Lyra will have the capacity to bring about a second Fall. The Magisterium, the tyrannical Church of Lyra's world, learns of her destiny; fearing that Lyra's fall from innocence could hold drastic consequences for humankind, the organization instigates a campaign to "find her and kill her" (AS 71).

Although Pullman's trilogy is marketed towards children, it raises serious theological and philosophical questions, particularly when read with *Paradise Lost* in mind. According to Mary Harris Russell, any reinterpretation of the Fall in a work of fiction such as Milton's or Pullman's "will have larger ideological consequences certainly, and these will affix themselves particularly to the central female figure" (213). Indeed, Lyra's identity as a reimagining of Milton's Eve makes her a very engaging and complex female character. In *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture*, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum explain the two main functions of the myth of the Fall in fiction:

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<sup>1</sup> In all subsequent citation, Pullman's novels will be abbreviated as the following: *The Golden Compass*, GC; *The Subtle Knife*, SK; *The Amber Spyglass*, AS.

First, it constructs an authority paradigm, that is a paradigm for a hierarchical relation between individuals and God . . . In retellings for children this also functions as a paradigmatic structure for teaching filial obedience, as the relationship of Adam and Eve to God is analogous with the relationship of a child to its parents and other adults. Second, the Fall sets up a gender paradigm, this is a paradigm which structures the social roles and relationships between men and women and the physical relations of men and women to the world. (37)

The plots of both *Paradise Lost* and *His Dark Materials* clearly fulfill these two objectives. Prior to consuming the forbidden fruit, Milton's Adam and Eve are childlike and innocent, looking to God as a father-figure. As the sole delegates of their gender, the two function as generalizations of men and women—thus, their relationship creates an analogue for the relationship between the sexes.

On one level, *His Dark Materials* is Pullman's response to Milton's ideas about authority, family, and gender in *Paradise Lost*. For centuries, the worlds in Pullman's novels have suffered under the influence of the Church because of Eve's transgression against the Authority (Pullman's fictionalized name for God). Religious tyranny encroaches upon every aspect of life, restricting free thought and human innovation. At the same time, the gender paradigm enacted by the Fall leaves women in all of the novels' worlds repressed into subservience to men and disdained for Eve's ancient defiance.

In the following pages, I intend to discuss Philip Pullman's re-imagining of Milton's version of the Fall in terms of authority, family, and gender, focusing particularly on *His Dark Materials*'s Lyra Belacqua and her role in subverting traditionally held notions of all three concepts. Finally, I will argue that Pullman's message about the state of humanity departs drastically from Milton's, and that this classifies *His Dark Materials* as a reaction to Milton's opus rather than a retelling of it.

### Authority

Before analyzing the implications of Lyra's relation to authority figures in the three novels, some of the key details of Pullman's intricate universe need explaining, especially for readers who may be unfamiliar with his work. In Lyra's world, people's souls exist outside of their bodies in physical manifestations known as "dæmons." A dæmon acts as a person's constant companion and takes the form of an animal that represents the person's innermost self—a monkey, lynx, or dog, for example. Throughout childhood, a person's dæmon has the power to shift between animal forms, taking the shape of whatever suits the child's personality at a given moment. As the child grows older, however, these shifts become less and less frequent until, on the cusp of adulthood, the dæmon settles into a permanent form. At this point dæmons begin to attract Dust, a mysterious substance which fuels much of the action in Pullman's trilogy.

Although the exact nature of Dust in *His Dark Materials* is never fully explained, Pullman seems to suggest that Dust represents knowledge. Self-

knowledge, critical knowledge, and, perhaps, sexual knowledge, are among the most important values in Pullman's text, and all come from the flow of Dust particles. Lyra's alethiometer—a highly sought-after, compass-like instrument that can truthfully answer any question the reader puts to it—is powered by Dust. In describing Lyra's worth, one character points out, "She can read the alethiometer; she has access to knowledge" (AS 60). It is precisely Lyra's access to truths otherwise unknown that initially puts her in danger, and leads her to question the origin and purpose of Dust.

According to Dr. Mary Malone, a physicist introduced in *The Subtle Knife*, Dust is both conscious and consciousness; as the tests in her laboratory prove, Dust particles congregate around mature adults, and even flock to "anything that [is] associated with human workmanship and human thought," such as a carved bone or figurine (SK 89). Dust is not only attracted to conscious thought, but stimulates it as well. Additionally, the wise and nearly incorporeal angels that Will and Lyra meet on their journey are made up entirely of Dust. Only as children approach maturity and stray from the sinlessness of childhood—gaining wisdom and understanding along the way—do they begin to attract Dust, a process which apparently symbolizes the burgeoning awareness of self and the pursuit of knowledge that coincides with adulthood. Lord Asriel explains to Lyra that when Dust was discovered, there was at last "a physical proof that something happened when innocence changed into experience" (GC 373).

That Pullman borrows from a passage of *Paradise Lost* for both his trilogy's title and epigraph is an invitation for readers to recognize his homage to Milton, as well as immediately make comparisons between the two texts. God's "dark materials" are described by Milton as the most fundamental elements, tamed within the "womb of Nature" in order to create the universe (2.910-6). The word "dust" appears in Milton's text at least 19 times, leading one to believe that Pullman's decision to name his esoteric dark matter "Dust" was no coincidence. In his novels, Pullman's Dust particles work as the essential building blocks for intelligent life by both gravitating towards and encouraging the spread of conscious thought. Descriptions of dust in *Paradise Lost*, meanwhile, are almost always synonymous with God's "dark materials" as the most basic building blocks of life: Adam's dialogue to Eve about how God "raised us from the dust and placed us here" (4.416) is reminiscent of the creation of Earth only two books previous. Both Pullman's and Milton's "dusts" are forms of world-shaping physical matter.

In Pullman's telling of the story of the Fall, Dust—also referred to in the books as "Shadows" and "dark matter" (SK 85-86)—came into being after Eve ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. According to the Bible, only after Eve and her husband eat the fruit do they develop self-consciousness: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves" (Gen. 3:6). Milton's interpretation of humankind's postlapsarian experience closely follows Genesis: Adam and Eve are overcome with "shame"

at this new awareness of themselves, and their disobedience against God makes them feel “unclean” (9.1096-97). Pullman’s message is the same, barring the fact that he alters the passage from Genesis in order to include Adam and Eve’s dæmons, explaining that once the first man and woman became self-aware, their dæmons settled into their “true form” rather than maintaining the shape-shifting freedom of children’s dæmons (*GC* 372). This shift from childishness to maturity, naivety to enlightenment, allows Dust to flourish and flow throughout the universe.

Once Dust begins to settle on a being, it encourages questions and the pursuit of more knowledge—thereby creating more Dust. As the wise angel Xaphania describes to Will and Lyra, “Dust is not a constant. There’s not a fixed quantity that has always been the same. Conscious beings make Dust, they renew it all the time, by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on” (*AS* 492). This connection between knowledge and Dust leads to much intellectual controversy throughout all of Pullman’s many worlds about the nature of dark matter, and whether it is good or bad. In the final pages of *The Golden Compass*, Lyra’s father, Lord Asriel, explains to her, “The Magisterium decided that Dust was the physical evidence of original sin” (371). Pullman’s Church has a thirst for power and control over humanity, and if Dust is knowledge and truth but *also* sin, according to the Church, then it stands to reason that the Magisterium is opposed to human flourishing and development that could threaten its power. Will’s father, John Parry, tells him, “Every little increase in human freedom has been fought over ferociously



between those who want us to know more and be wiser and stronger, and those who want us to obey and be humble and submit" (SK 320). To "submit" to the Magisterium's will requires compliance and unquestioning servility—which the existence of Dust inherently prevents. For this reason, the Church fears and abhors Dust, for if free thought and questions are permitted to flourish, the Magisterium could lose its grip on humankind.

Lyra's world is plagued by the oppressive dominance of the Magisterium, a religious organization similar to the Catholic Church in Will's world. The Magisterium is a frightening portrait of iron-fisted religious authority; it has an influential hand in almost every political sector and suppresses any potential act of "heresy," often with violence (GC 96). The people of Lyra's and Will's worlds, and perhaps many others, live in constant fear of being accused of heresy for speaking against the Magisterium and its methods—torture and death are common punishments for such crimes.<sup>2</sup>

The Church also funds and organizes the horrific General Oblation Board—an institution which kidnaps children and performs hideous experiments on them in the name of preserving innocence. The process, called intercision, essentially cuts away a child from its dæmon, leaving the child a hollow and obedient shell. On seeing a child without a dæmon for the first time, Lyra is repulsed: "A human being with no dæmon was like someone without a face, or with their ribs laid open and their heart torn out:

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Mrs. Coulter and several Magisterium officials torture a witch for information regarding Lyra's destiny (SK 35-40).

something unnatural and uncanny that belonged to the world of night-ghasts, not the waking world of sense" (GC 214). The intercision procedure was developed by the Board to prevent children's dæmons from settling, therefore inhibiting their ability to attract Dust. Lyra's mother, Mrs. Coulter, tries to reason with her on behalf of the Board, "The doctors do it for the children's own good, my love. Dust is something bad, something wrong, something evil and wicked. Grownups and their dæmons are infected with Dust so deeply that it's too late for them" (GC 282-83). By preventing children from growing up, the Magisterium intends to keep them in a state of placid, unquestioning compliance.

While the Church's influence over humankind has grown over time, the Authority seems to have weakened significantly since the creation of the universe. Pullman's dying God appears to be reinforcing Friedrich Nietzsche's criticisms of "outmoded" Christian beliefs and practices. As Donna Freitas and Jason King explain, "The divine figure that [Nietzsche] pronounces dead is someone who kills imagination, creativity, and self-development—a god who paralyzes human will, buries us in fears of sin, and otherwise keeps us from really living" (8-9). In other words, Pullman's God represents the antithesis of what Dust brings to humanity, and in many ways parallels Milton's God in *Paradise Lost*.

Milton's God is decried by Satan as an absolute and monarchical power—one that will discourage any attempted threats to His reign, as evidenced by His expulsion of Satan and his rebellion from Heaven. The

Archangel Michael asks Satan, "How hast thou disturbed / Heav'n's blessed peace, and into nature brought / Misery, uncreated till the crime / Of thy rebellion?" (6.266-69). In this passage, Michael implies that disobedience against God's authority is the root of all unhappiness and discord. Had Adam and Eve not consumed the forbidden fruit, they and their progeny would have remained in Paradise forever—but limited by their lack of knowledge.

Although Milton's Adam and Eve are given the free will to do as they please in Eden, God's explicit forbiddance of consuming fruit from the Tree of Knowledge—thus prohibiting from them the knowledge of good and evil, which could, as Satan posits, make them "godlike"—is a way of limiting their free thought and consciousness. As Satan observes:

One fatal Tree there stands of Knowledge called,  
Forbidden them to taste: knowledge forbidden?  
Suspicious, reasonless. Why should their Lord  
Envy them that? Can it be sin to know,  
Can it be death? And do they only stand  
By ignorance, is that their happy state,  
The proof of their obedience and their faith? (4.515-21)

Prior to Satan's serpentine influence, neither Eve nor Adam contemplates eating from the forbidden tree. Instead, they are content to continue about their toils in the Garden, remaining in a state of innocence. Without unlimited access to knowledge, their mental development is stunted.

Pullman's novels, with their emphasis on the importance of unlimited human potential and rebelling against restrictive authority, are clearly meant to support Satan's ideology in *Paradise Lost*. In addition to describing the corruption of the Church, Pullman's characterization of the Authority is one of a domineering overlord—Baruch, another of the trilogy's many angels, tells Lord Asriel, "The Authority considers that conscious beings of every kind have become dangerously independent" (AS 61). The idea of God and the Church limiting the growth and potential of humankind is a prevalent theme explored in *His Dark Materials*. Although the Church's clutches on everyday life, particularly in Lyra's world, have tightened over the centuries, the actual presence of God has diminished significantly since the days of Creation. Mrs. Coulter, shaken by Asriel's war against Heaven as it peaks in the final novel, poignantly asks:

Well, where is God . . . if he's alive? And why doesn't he speak anymore? At the beginning of the world, God walked in the Garden and spoke with Adam and Eve. Then he began to withdraw, and he forbade Moses to look at his face. Later, in the time of Daniel, he was aged—he was the Ancient of Days. Where is he now? (AS 328)

The Authority's gradually diminished presence in the lives of humankind is a direct consequence of the amount of Dust men and women attract; as science, self-awareness, and religious discontentment grow, so too does the amount of conscious matter in Pullman's universe.

In Lyra's world, however, and in any others where the Church has grown to prominence, the Authority's "death" does not mean the end of human repression. Although He is fading quickly, the Magisterium and the Archangel Metatron quickly rise to fill the void left in the Authority's absence. As the Authority weakens and fades from prominence, the Church and Metatron continue to prevent the spread of Dust in order to retain and increase their power. The wise rebel angel Xaphania explains this phenomenon to the witch Serafina Pekkala:

She said that all the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity. She and the rebel angels, the followers of wisdom, have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches has always tried to keep them closed . . . And for most of that time, wisdom has had to work in secret, whispering her words, moving like a spy through the humble places of the world while the courts and palaces are occupied by her enemies. (AS 479)

This invisible war between wisdom and stupidity, innocence and experience, comes to a head in *His Dark Materials*. Lyra's and Will's combined destinies are intended to reverse the damage that the Authority and the Church have wreaked on the growth of Dust.

### Family

It is difficult to discuss conceptions of patriarchal authority in these novels without also contemplating the roles of family and filial relationships.

As we saw earlier, Stephens and McCallum posit that retellings of the Fall geared towards children function allegorically as lessons in parental obedience; as Adam and Eve are subservient to God, so too should a child be to its parents (37). This relationship between God and family in the eyes of the children plays an important role in *His Dark Materials*. God, traditionally regarded as “the Father,” is an obvious patriarchal symbol. His absence from Pullman’s worlds is analogous to the absence of a literal father in the life of a child. In the trilogy, both Will and Lyra grow up parentless—however, Pullman barely acknowledges the figure of the absent mother, choosing instead to focus on male figures and their significance. Lyra and Will must consequently grapple with the void left in their lives by the men who disappeared during their infancy.

Will’s father, a famed explorer journeying through the barren Arctic, inadvertently became trapped in Lyra’s world during his son’s infancy. As Will grows older, his mother begins to descend into a state of mental incompetency, leaving him to care for himself. The loss of his father, coupled with the virtual absence of his mother, functions as a metaphor for the absence of God in Will’s life; without a parental figure—male or female—to love, teach, and protect him, Will becomes fiercely independent. Unable to rely on God, his own parents, or any other adult, Will Parry must push himself to become strong, dependable, and loyal to the few loved ones he has. Will’s personal strength eventually qualifies him to be the “bearer” of

*Æsahættr*—the second novel’s titular Subtle Knife—a blade sharp enough to slice windows between the fabric of Pullman’s varied worlds (*SK* 180).

Lyra, along the same lines, has never had any kind of parental influence in her young life at Jordan College, set in an English Oxford parallel to our own. Growing up at the university with minimal guidance from the busy Scholars or college servants, Lyra is left to her own devices as a “half-wild, half-civilized girl” (*GC* 18), scampering in the mud and playing war with the children of Oxford’s working class. Over the course of the trilogy, however, Lyra seems to realize the significant absence in her otherwise idyllic childhood; she tells Will, “I just grew up on my own, really; I don’t remember anyone ever holding me or cuddling me, it was just me and Pan as far back as I can go” (*AS* 184). Lyra’s and Will’s lack of filial influence, and by metaphorical extension the vacancy of God from their lives, forces them to find personal strength and individuality rather than rely on benevolent authority figures to care for them. Despite the dangerous tasks set before Will and Lyra over the course of the novels with minimal adult assistance, Pullman’s depiction of their growth and power shows that the children come out stronger by the end of the series because of this forced independence.

For much of her childhood, Lyra has been told by the Scholars of Jordan College that her parents died in an airship crash during her infancy. Isolated by both the College’s walls and her own innocence, Lyra leaves Jordan and eventually travels with the nomadic gyptians. Only then does she learn the scandal of her birth: rather than being orphaned by a tragic

accident, Lyra was instead willingly abandoned by her high-society parents in order to hide the adulterous scandal of her birth. Later, she also learns from the gyptian King, John Faa, that she has, in fact, known her parents all along: Lord Asriel, who posed as her uncle during his infrequent visits to Jordan College, and the wicked Mrs. Coulter, whom it is revealed was a key coordinator for the General Oblation Board. The relationships that Lyra develops with her parents throughout the books function as powerful metaphors for her relationship to the Authority. While Lord Asriel is an important figure in analyzing the authority paradigm in relation to God, Mrs. Coulter, as a mother, plays a vital role in the discussion of the gender paradigm, which I address in the next section.

The Authority's retreat into seclusion entails a separation from the lives of humans not unlike an absent parent's separation from the life of a child. Neither Will nor Lyra seem to come from any kind of religious background: readers never learn of Will or his unstable mother's beliefs, and can therefore assume that religion bears little impact in their lives. Lyra, by comparison, is reluctantly dragged to church by the Librarian only very rarely during her years at Jordan. Because of this lack of religious guidance, neither child grows up under the influence of the Authority; this, coupled with the absence of a legitimate father, consequently leaves both children without any kind of real patriarchal structure. The angel Baruch explains to Will, "When the Authority was young, [his fortress] wasn't surrounded by clouds, but as time passed, he gathered them more and more thickly. No one has seen the



summit for thousands of years" (AS 31-32). The God of Pullman's universes has decayed from a fearsome and powerful Miltonian king into an invisible idea, hidden away in the mists.

Lord Asriel's character in *The Golden Compass* is the closest thing Lyra has to a God-figure. Much like the Authority, he is distant from her, and his motives are shrouded in mystery. Although Lyra initially knows nothing of Lord Asriel's plan to bring down the Authority at any cost, nor of his distinct lack of care for her as his own daughter, she associates him with a vague benevolence. With a blind perseverance not unlike that of religious fervor, she is assured that he is doing what is right. Lyra is determined to rescue Asriel from his prison on Svalbard and to bring him the alethiometer, which she believes will help him complete the strange work he is doing in the North.

Finally, after a long and dangerous journey to Lord Asriel's prison, Lyra reveals to Asriel her knowledge of his paternity. His reply devastates her: "Yes. So what?" (GC 367). Asriel's callous response to his child's exclamation directly parallels the disregard the Authority holds for his own "children." Neither patriarch feels any obligation or duty towards the well-being of his offspring, and for Lyra it is a crushing truth. Her entire purpose in the series' first installment has led up to this point: to serve her father, to dedicate herself to a firm belief in his unseen benevolence and love, and to be bitterly disappointed at his inability to return her dedication. This disappointment is not unlike what a devout believer in God undergoes upon realizing that his or her devotion may fall upon deaf ears. Dr. Mary Malone, in describing to Will

and Lyra why she decided to forfeit her vows as a nun, tells them, "There's no one to fret, no one to condemn, no one to bless me for being a good girl, no one to punish me for being wicked. Heaven was empty. I didn't know whether God had died, or whether there never had been a God at all" (AS 445). Mary's statement acts as a precursor for the death of the Authority at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, but also demonstrates that the Authority's absence was felt long before his actual demise.

But Lyra's devastation does not last long: she rails against Asriel's indifference, telling him bluntly, "You en't my *father*. My *father* wouldn't treat me like that. Fathers are supposed to love their daughters, en't they? You don't love me, and I don't love you, and that's a fact" (GC 368). Rather than accepting the apathy of her supposed patriarchal figure, she fights back with ferocity. Lyra doesn't ask for her father's attention or affection, instead making certain that he knows she no longer needs or wants it. The same could be said of her relationship with the Authority, who remains a distant figure to her until His death at the end of the series. This offers an interesting departure from Milton's work; in comparison to Lyra's bitter defiance, Adam and Eve's devastation at God's punishment of them is far more palpable and emotional, presenting God with "sorrow unfeigned, and humiliation meek" (10.1104). Where the two of them are willing to supplicate themselves to God and beg for forgiveness, Lyra scorns Lord Asriel right back.

In the wake of being abandoned by both her biological father *and* religious Father, Lyra's paternal void is tentatively filled with stand-in father

figures. Lacking a family to call her own, she constructs one from the people she meets along her journey, including the gyptians, John Faa and Farder Coram; the aeronaut Lee Scoresby; the Gallivespain Tialys; and, most significantly, Iorek Byrnison, the armored bear. While the Authority and Lord Asriel may have forgotten Lyra, these alternative fathers dedicate themselves to her protection and well-being. Lee Scoresby seems to speak for all of them when he says to Serafina Pekkala, "That little girl has had bad luck with her true parents, and maybe I can make it up to her" (SK 52). And he does: Lee sacrifices his life so that Lyra has a chance at surviving the holy war between Lord Asriel and the Authority's forces. However, Lee's death leaves Lyra with one less surrogate father to rely on in the final stretches of her quest.

The only moment of fatherly affection in the entire trilogy—the only moment in which Lyra is shown tender love from an adult male protector—is from Iorek Byrnison, who cradles Lyra in his paws and allows her to feel "as safe as she had ever felt in her life" (AS 195). These are the only explicit incidents of kindness the Lyra receives from a father-like figure in all of *His Dark Materials*. Despite this and other acts of affection and self-sacrifice on the part of these fatherly figures, Pullman insinuates that the dedication of these men does not make up for the loss of a biological father. As she rails against Lord Asriel's coldness, Lyra shouts, "I love an armored bear more'n I love my father. And I bet Iorek Byrnison loves me more'n you do" (GC 368). Lyra here seems to recognize the outlandishness that a bear (despite being

sentient and somewhat humanized in Lyra's world) would serve as a better paternal figure than her own father.

In the end, these parental stand-ins are never quite involved enough to become legitimate guardians—after Lyra and Pantalaimon's dangerous experiences in the harsh North, Lyra realizes aloud, "Iorek Byrnison couldn't follow us and help. Nor could Farder Coram or Serafina Pekkala or Lee Scoresby or no one" (*GC* 398-99). Pullman's emphasis on the inability of these alternate parent characters to fully satisfy the needs of children reinforces the feeling of absence left by both God and biological parents. And if even non-human Iorek, who comes the closest of all these surrogate parents to qualifying as a loving patriarchal figure, cannot be qualified as such, then Lyra's parental void can never be filled.

This distinct lack of patriarchal authority and influence is an intentional device used by Pullman to indicate that the old ways of the world "are changing, or dying, or empty" (*SK* 270). Lyra's ability to function and grow strong despite the absence of a valid father-figure represents a significant change in traditionally held views on the importance of patriarchy (Russell 220-21). This is most specifically shown by the death of the Authority at the end of the series. Mrs. Coulter, the first mortal to see the Authority face-to-face in thousands of years, has "the impression of terrifying decrepitude, of a face sunken in wrinkles, of trembling hands, and of a mumbling mouth and rheumy eyes" (*AS* 396). God has become so ancient and outdated that He is a figure to be pitied, not feared and respected. In the end,

the Authority has become so frail and brittle from the influx of Dust and the loss of his power that he is killed—not by Lord Asriel’s army, or by Will’s god-killing Æsahættr knife—but by a breath of wind. This accidental killing, brought on by Lyra’s innocent kindness in trying to free the wretched Old One from his prison, signifies a death of the old traditions to make way for the new.

### Gender

Over the course of the novels, Lyra remains largely unaware of the holy war in which Pullman’s adult characters are embroiled, and this ignorance makes the innocence of her actions all the more significant. Although the Authority, entrapped in his abandoned crystal prison during the chaos of Lord Asriel’s war, cowers away from Will’s offer of aid, he responds to Lyra’s outstretched hand with a trusting helplessness: Pullman writes, “He tried to smile, and to bow, and his ancient eyes deep in their wrinkles blinked at her with innocent wonder” (AS 410). The Authority has become so enfeebled by his age that, as Lyra and Will pull him from his cage, his delicate form disintegrates into the wind. If the death of the Authority represents an end to an outdated, oppressive system of belief, then Lyra’s inadvertent assistance in his passing signifies a new era of politics—particularly when it comes to gender. Mary Harris Russell aptly paraphrases Pullman’s message: “When the new Eve is ready for the new creation, built on truth, the old Authority, built on a lie, must vanish. Their portraits are inextricably linked” (212). As Donna

Freitas and Jason King further point out, Pullman's God is "unmistakably a *he*" (7), and I would argue that Pullman's decision to have such an obvious patriarchal symbol crumble at the hands of a young girl suggests a radical overturning of traditionally-held notions of gender and power.

The biblical story of the Fall has commonly been used to "justify the oppression of women" (Lerner 109); Eve's disobedience against God and her subsequent penitence to her husband creates an imbalanced sexual hierarchy, thus setting up a misogynistic pattern in gender relations that has persisted for millennia. In her essay, "Milton and the Sexes," Diane K. McColley describes this phenomenon, writing that, "God making Eve from Adam's rib . . . suggests a sex that is subordinate, perhaps created only secondarily in God's image and so spiritually inferior. Coupled with the story that Eve was the first to disobey God and enticed her husband to do likewise, Genesis thus affords excuses for misogyny" (150). Milton's interpretation, McColley asserts, offers a much more balanced perspective on gender, "for however many of Milton's epic voices call Eve 'the inferior,' the poem as a whole gives at least as much praise to qualities often considered 'feminine' as to those considered 'masculine' " (156). Features such as Eve's "softness" and "sweet attractive grace" garner just as much aesthetic appreciation from Milton's narrator as Adam's "valor" and propensity for "contemplation" (4.297-98), and "the nurturing 'woman's work' of dressing and keeping the garden, together with increasing and multiplying, [are] the shared and dignified concern of both sexes" (McColley 157). Although Milton describes Adam and Eve (and,

consequently, the sexes they represent) as being inherently different, there is little evidence in *Paradise Lost*'s prelapsarian Eden to suggest vast inequalities between them.

The relationship between Milton's Adam and Eve is clearly hierarchical, but based on blissful mutuality rather than a Genesis-perpetuated dynamic of male domination and female subjection. When Adam asks God for a companion like himself, and complains of the animals' limitations regarding human companionship, he reasons that, "Among unequals what society / Can sort, what harmony or true delight?" (8.383-84). If the inferiority of God's other creatures is unsatisfying to Adam, undoubtedly a subordinate female counterpart would be equally displeasing. Instead of wishing for a mate to hold dominion over, prelapsarian Adam seeks to become "one flesh, one heart, one soul" with his beloved partner (8.499). The Book of Genesis, on the one hand, designates Eve as a mere "helper" to Adam, rather than a partner or equal (*Holy Bible*, Gen. 2.18).

Prelapsarian Eve, although often characterized by her "submissive charms" (4.498), is far freer from subjection than her post-Fall identity. When Eve says to Adam, in reference to their joint gardening and earthly toil, "Let us divide our labors" (9.224), she is insisting on having independence from him. She argues effectively against his initial trepidation, explaining that there is nothing to fear, until finally "from her husband's hand her hand / Soft she withdrew" (9.385-86). Thus, Eve asserts her own will against that of her

husband by separating herself from his side, and is able to go about her own work without male supervision.

This early version of Eve is very different from the guilt-riddled Eve that Milton presents in the epic's final scene, who believes herself "unworthy" of her husband (12.622). Indeed, Milton's closing representation of the mother of humankind adheres more closely to the misogynistic ideas perpetuated by most readings of Genesis. McColley writes that "postlapsarian wrongs occur when a sex or other group thinks itself superior, or any one person is exploited or scorned" (160), and this notion of feminine inferiority in Edenic mythology is certainly evident in Milton's postlapsarian Eve, who seems ultimately relegated to "meek submission" to Adam (12.597). Thus the Son decrees to Eve after her indiscretion, "Thy sorrow I will greatly multiply / By thy conception; children thou shalt bring / In sorrow forth, and to thy husband's will / Thine shall submit, he over thee shall rule" (10.193-96). This subordination to men to which Eve (and, presumably, all subsequent women) has been condemned functions as a basis for modern sexism.

In *His Dark Materials*, Pullman invites readers to explore this idea of the Edenic "curse" by giving ample evidence of the residual effects of sexism in Lyra's world: When invited to a dinner at which students from one of Oxford's women's colleges are also in attendance, for example, Lyra treats the women with scorn. Pullman writes, "She regarded female Scholars with a proper Jordan disdain: there *were* such people, but, poor things, they could never be taken more seriously than animals dressed up and acting a play" (*GC*



66). In Lyra's world, much like in Will's in centuries past, women are forbidden from attending the same universities as men. The few women with whom Lyra comes into contact at Jordan College are homely servants or gruff Egyptian women, and, because of her upbringing by male Scholars, she has little respect for them.

However, not all women in Lyra's world are demeaned: it isn't until meeting Marisa Coulter that Lyra develops a respect for her own sex. Unlike the bland female Scholars whom Lyra has previously encountered, Mrs. Coulter is beautiful, elegant, and interesting—perhaps the first typically “feminine” woman whom Lyra has ever known in her sheltered college life. In addition to her loveliness, Mrs. Coulter is, to Lyra's surprise, educated and empowered. Not long after their first meeting, Mrs. Coulter informs Lyra that she is “one of the very few female members” of the prestigious Royal Arctic Institute (*GC* 76). Marisa Coulter's attractiveness and influence represent a kind of womanhood the likes of which Lyra has never seen, leaving her “enchanted” (*GC* 66).

When Mrs. Coulter invites Lyra to live with her in London, and eventually join her on an expedition to the dangerous Northern lands, Lyra's admiration grows even stronger. Lyra is stunned by the differences between Jordan's drab brick walls and Mrs. Coulter's posh, frilled-and-flowered London flat. Pullman writes, “[Lyra] had seen a great deal of beauty in her short life, but it was Jordan College beauty, Oxford beauty—grand and stony and masculine. In Jordan College, much was magnificent, but nothing was

pretty. In Mrs. Coulter's flat, everything was pretty" (*GC* 75). If Jordan College with its hulking architecture represents masculinity, then the delicate, meticulous prettiness of Mrs. Coulter's flat is undoubtedly feminine. As Lyra shifts from a male-dominated environment to one that is inherently female, Pullman offers readers a chance to compare these two drastically different gender stereotypes and determine where exactly Lyra's place is between the two.

In an effort to please this beguiling new woman, Lyra willingly wears dresses and makeup for the first time and is dazzled by the glamour of Mrs. Coulter's cosmopolitan lifestyle. Lyra finds herself being introduced to high-society women like her mother, "so unlike female Scholars or gyptian boat mothers or college servants as almost to be a new sex altogether, one with dangerous powers and qualities such as elegance, charm, and grace" (*GC* 81). After a short time with Mrs. Coulter, however, Lyra begins to realize that this life is not meant for her: she grows tired of the parties and ballroom dances, the dress-shopping and social obligations. Weeks pass without Mrs. Coulter following through on her promise to take Lyra adventuring in the North, and Lyra's *dæmon*, Pantalaimon, spitefully confides to her, "She's never going to the North! She's going to keep us here forever . . . She's just making a pet out of you" (*GC* 84). The word "pet" in this passage is especially significant: having been stripped of the adventurous mud-slinging, roof-clamoring boyishness that she displayed in Oxford, Lyra is instead trussed in a "new dress" and "patent-leather shoes" (*GC* 85), encouraged by Mrs. Coulter to be "perfectly

behaved, sweet, charming, innocent, attentive, [and] delightful in every way” (GC 87). Unsurprisingly, Lyra and Pantalaimon soon decide that they must escape. Just as Lyra’s decision to leave Oxford allowed her to reject its “stony” masculinity, her choice to flee from Mrs. Coulter’s London flat in pursuit of her own adventure is a symbolic rejection of her mother’s brand of femininity.

Lyra’s status as the second Eve and Pullman’s heavy borrowing from *Paradise Lost* invites readers to draw comparisons between Pullman’s and Milton’s female protagonists. Although prelapsarian Eve appears perfectly content with the “love and mutual honor” that she shares with her husband (8.58), the serpent’s temptation entices her to question Adam’s (and, by extension, God’s) authority over her:

. . . So to add what wants  
 In female sex, the more to draw his love,  
 And render me more equal, and perhaps,  
 A thing not undesirable, sometime  
 Superior; for inferior who is free? (9.821-25)

Eve reasons, by way of the serpent, that consuming fruit from the Tree of Knowledge will better her—for despite their prelapsarian happiness and mutuality, Adam considers Eve inferior “in the mind / And inward faculties” (8.541-42). Thus, she inadvertently sows the seeds of rebellion against the patriarchal restrictions placed on her. Her mind having been opened to the knowledge of good and evil, she begins to question the paradigm of authority

enacted over her by both modes of patriarchal influence in her life—God and her husband. However, Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden seems to weaken her will almost entirely, relegating her to a state of humble acquiescence as she walks with Adam dejectedly out of Paradise.

Prior to the Fall, Eve seems to share many characteristics with Lyra, who is constantly at odds with male figures in her life. But rather than submitting to male dominance, as Eve does after the Fall, Lyra actively disregards it. While Eve’s act of disobedience takes time to develop, we meet Lyra on the first page of *The Golden Compass* breaking the rules set out for her by the stuffy male Scholars at Jordan. By depicting Lyra sneaking into the Retiring Room, Pullman cues his readers to recognize immediately that she is not a timid or obedient girl, much like Milton’s strong-willed prelapsarian Eve.

Although Lyra and her Edenic predecessor both rebel against their patriarchal environments, they seem to do so in different ways. A telling example of this difference between Milton’s Eve and Pullman’s Lyra occurs when they each meet their respective male counterparts. In *Paradise Lost*, Eve recounts the story of her creation, explaining that she sees a form “less fair, / Less winning soft, less amiably mild” than her own reflection (4.478-9) and initially turns away from him. She goes on to describe how Adam calls her back:

With that thy gentle hand

Seized mine, I yielded, and from that time see

How beauty is excelled by manly grace

And wisdom, which alone is truly fair. (4.488-91)

Eve's acquiescence to Adam's will in the couple's first moments together sets the tone for their prelapsarian relationship. Not only does she "yield" to his request for companionship, but Eve even goes so far as to declare feminine beauty as "excelled" by masculine grace and wisdom. She determines her value according to her physical loveliness alone, and finds Adam's "wisdom" to be far more pleasing.

By stark contrast, we must examine Lyra and Will's first contact in *The Subtle Knife*. Instead of fleeing or taking a passive role when confronted with this strange masculine presence, as Eve does, Lyra actually *attacks* Will. When the two of them unknowingly seek refuge in the same building in the haunted city of Cittagazze, Will is startled as a "door burst open and something came hurtling at him like a wild beast" (SK 20). Unsure whether initially Will presents a threat, Lyra actively fights him instead of submitting to him. If Eve, after the Fall, is supposed to prefigure modern womanhood and embody a postlapsarian notion of femininity, Lyra, then, seems to be a contradiction to this traditional sex role.

Lyra's Fall in *The Amber Spyglass* is meant to symbolize a rebalancing of gender politics, essentially fixing the misogyny that has plagued all worlds since the original Fall. Lyra and Will's relationship is based on equality, not female subservience and male dominance: throughout the series, Will and Lyra support one another as equals. Instead of commanding or belittling one

another, as Adam and Eve do after consuming the forbidden fruit, Will and Lyra treat one another as partners—speaking on their future deaths, Lyra tells Will, “When they use our atoms to make new lives, they won’t be able to take *one*, they’ll have to take *two*, one of you and one of me, we’ll be joined so tight” (AS 497). The Lady Salmakia, one of the many people they befriend on their travels, also observes, “The boy would go with her to the end of the world” (AS 302). Their love becomes a partnership based on mutual respect, refuting the oppressive postlapsarian gender paradigm of old and offering a return to a prelapsarian bliss similar to Adam and Eve’s.

Lyra’s temptation is that of sensual knowledge, and her kiss with Will in the forest is the first step toward reversing the loss of Dust that has threatened to wipe out free thought and knowledge from all the worlds. Pullman writes that their union forms them into “the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance. The Dust pouring down from the start had found a living home again, and these children-no-longer-children, saturated with love, were the cause of it all” (AS 470). With the flow of Dust corrected, Will, Lyra, and conscious life in every world is permitted once more to flourish. The “inheritance” that Pullman presents is one of unlimited knowledge and potential for development.

### Conclusion

After Lyra and Will’s love culminates as the second Fall, the children are forced to separate from one another: the ancient angel Xaphania explains

to them that the amount of Dust lost over the centuries due to the oppression of the Authority and his Church, as well as through the gaps cut between worlds by the Æsahætrr knife, has been too great. The only way to make up for this loss of dark materials and restore the worlds to prosperity, she explains to the devastated children, is to close all of the windows and return to their respective homeworlds—parting Will and Lyra forever.

But this is not the only task the angel entrusts to Will and Lyra. Xaphania says to the children that, when they return home, they must encourage others to embrace knowledge and experience as they have done:

And if you help everyone else in your worlds to do that, by helping them to learn and understand about themselves and each other and the way everything works, and by showing them how to be kind instead of cruel, and patient instead of hasty, and cheerful instead of surly, and above all how to keep their minds open and free and curious . . . Then they will renew enough to replace what [has been] lost. (AS 492)

Her directions at the end of the trilogy's final installment are strikingly similar to Michael's decree to Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost's* final book:

. . . only add  
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add Faith,  
Add Virtue, Patience, Temperance, add Love,  
By name to come called Charity, the soul  
Of all the rest: then wilt though not be loth

To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess

A paradise within thee, happier far. (12.581–87)

In both passages, the angels are encouraging man and woman to seek out fulfillment despite their banishment from paradise or, in Will and Lyra's case, the bliss of living out their lives together. The modes of attaining this "paradise within" are presented very differently by Milton and Pullman, however. Michael's instructions to Adam and Eve command them to supplicate themselves humbly to God in repentance—Adam acknowledges this, agreeing with the angel "that to obey is best / And love with fear the only God" (12.561–62). Xaphania's words encourage the children—and, by extension, all other conscious, Dust-attracting life forms—to seek out fulfillment within themselves without seeking the acceptance of God, but rather solely by seeking knowledge, being kind, and maintaining an open mind. By doing this, she reasons, the children are to build Pullman's "Republic of Heaven" (AS 518).

Pullman's concept of the Republic of Heaven is what primarily separates his ideology from Milton's Kingdom of Heaven as portrayed in *Paradise Lost*. A kingdom with a monarchical (and patriarchal) God ruling over His lesser subjects embodies the problematic authority and gender paradigms that *His Dark Materials* presents to readers. By depicting the Authority as a kingly figure of oppression and, like Milton, depicting the Church as an organization from which "truth shall retire / bestuck with sland'rous darts, and works of faith / rarely be found" (12.535–37), Pullman



villainizes conceptions of Heaven and human subservience to God. Pullman opts instead for a republican theology that establishes all creatures as equal members of a universal kingdom, deserving of growth and enlightenment. This difference in opinion prohibits classifying *His Dark Materials* as simply a re-telling of *Paradise Lost*; instead, the trilogy functions as a direct reaction to Milton's epic. Pullman's Republic is, in his trilogy, a cure for the perceived ills wrought on humankind's development by Milton's Kingdom.

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